Fields & Stations

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Panoramas, Ideals, and Kitsch

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This time has revealed our national myth to be not unlike a cyclorama – immersive yet antiquated, a beautiful, almost accidental form of propaganda.

by Zora O'Neill

1

At the Cairo airport, somehow I'm separated from the crowd, and I wind up in the shiny arrivals hall alone, under a vast dome. A uniformed woman asks if I need a taxi, and when I say someone's meeting me, she says, "Are you sure?"

Past the doubtful woman, through a small exit door, is the Cairo I know: a gauntlet of people, many shouting, in a scrum as dense as the hall was empty; orange mercury-vapour glow; the smoky smell of car exhaust. Finally I spot Medo – he's hanging back, out of the crowd, his pale face half in shadow from his black hoodie. He grins and grabs my suitcases. "Let's get away from these crazy people, Zora."

I haven't seen Medo since we met in late 2011. He was an outgoing college student, eager to practice his already excellent English. He introduced me to his mom – who's my age – and his three younger sisters. As soon as I left, they started insisting I return. It took me more than five years, but here I am.

"What are your plans? I will be your driver, anywhere," Medo says as we inch through the late-night traffic, a sea of red taillights. Despite his language talents and his college degree, he is unemployed, so he has free time. "Where do you want to go?"

My last visit was for work, taking Arabic classes and doing research for two book projects. This trip is vacation – I'm free as well.

"You know the October War Panorama?" I say. "I'd like to go see that."

Medo takes his eyes off the road to give me a long look, one of his sharp eyebrows raised and his thin lips pursed in amusement. "We have pyramids, Zora, and mummies and tombs." He has a way of drawing out the vowels in my name to tease me. "And you want to see this panorama, Zora? Why?"

2

Updating a guidebook to Pennsylvania in 2015, I visited the Civil War battle site of Gettysburg. At the museum, I received a timed ticket for something called a Cyclorama. I went in expecting the usual short video documentary: black-and-white photos sliding across the screen, some light re-enactment with muskets puffing real smoke, a celebrity narrator.

Instead I found myself on a raised platform in the middle of an enormous 360-degree oil painting of the field of Gettysburg, the same landscape I'd just seen from the parking lot. The painting's horizon line appeared to be miles distant. Blue-uniformed Union soldiers surged against grey-coated Confederate troops; horses reared and charged; muskets made their puffs of smoke. At the bottom edge of the painting, the foreground blended seamlessly with plaster hillocks, fake grass, trampled fences, even a cannon.

As spotlights rose on different sections of the painting, a narrator described each fateful moment of Pickett's Charge, a turning point toward Union victory, when eleven thousand men died in the fighting. I tuned out the military details as I gaped at the scale of the artwork.

The Battle of Gettysburg is 115 metres long by nearly 13 metres high; it forms a circle about 12 metres across. The head painter, a French artist named Paul Philippoteaux, worked with a team of some twenty other artists to complete it in 1884. And when they were done, they made a copy.

Cycloramas – or panoramas, as they're known outside of North America – were a fad in the late 19th century. Often described as "the IMAX of their day," cycloramas were actually more like mega-scale postcards. The first ones, made

by English artist Robert Barker in the late 18th century, featured far-flung cityscapes such as Constantinople. Barker's patent for the domed circular structure lined with a floor-to-ceiling painting dubbed his invention *La nature à la coupe d'oeil* (Nature at a Glance); he later coined the term *panorama*. He made a solid fortune selling tickets, and his success inspired a flock of European painters – including his own son, Henry.

In the 1880s, the phenomenon swept America. From competing teams of French and German painters, investors commissioned giant works that toured from city to city, displayed in huge, purpose-built rotundas. At the height of the cyclorama craze, there were dozens of paintings in circulation in the United States; Chicago alone had six rotundas. Virtual travel – *Paris by Night*, say – was still popular, but the cyclorama format lent itself to historical drama too: the chaos of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 was rendered in the round, along with a number of Civil War battles.

Then along came moving pictures, and this grand-scale art form disappeared almost without a trace. Most of the paintings were destroyed, and the rotundas razed. One building, the Boston Cyclorama, survives as a concert hall, but when I mentioned it to a friend who lived nearby, she thought it had something to do with bike races.

After *Gettysburg*, I wanted to see more. I learned that only two other cycloramas survived in North America, at least for public viewing, and *The Battle of Atlanta*, ordinarily in Georgia, was closed for restoration. That left *Jerusalem on the Day of the Crucifixion*, in the Québec town of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré. My husband, a good sport, agreed to go for our anniversary.

The painting has been on display in the same place since 1895, jazzed up just slightly in the 1960s with a vaguely Oriental dome and a swoopy-cursive sign. Inside was cool, carpeted gloom, with no other visitors. There was no dramatic narration, no sound effects. An attendant gave us binoculars to inspect the miniature scenes, including a number of women in daringly diaphanous robes. The paint was crazed with age.

Back out in the summer sun, my husband and I encountered a crowd headed for the nearby basilica, to see a miraculous statue of Saint Anne. Those who had paid their respects sat under shade trees, drinking from water bottles and massaging their sore feet. Some posed for photos in front of the church. No one turned toward the cyclorama.

At first glance, my experience in Québec seemed to confirm my first, cursory research: cycloramas were over. A wacky fad, swept aside by superior technology – and, in the case of *Jerusalem*, more compelling religious attractions.

In fact, according to the International Panorama Council database, which I found after the Canada trip, we are living in another golden age of cycloramas. More than a dozen 19th-century cycloramas are still on view; the oldest, from 1814, is a village scene in Thun, Switzerland. And since the 1980s, at least fifty massive new 360-degree paintings (and, in a few cases, digital photo prints) have been created, most of them in Europe and China.

One of these new works, I learned, was in Cairo.

3

Medo lives not far from the October War Panorama, in Heliopolis, but the traffic and assorted fences and medians make the trip long and full of U-turns. "Look at that, Zora," Medo says as we pass an army base, its gate blocked with an almost sculptural density of concrete barriers and razor wire. "When the army fears its own people, you know it's wrong. Why are they like this? You can still make money and serve the people. But they just take."

Medo loves to drive, and I see now that it might be in part because the car is a space in which he can speak freely. By many accounts, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's police state is now even worse than that of Hosni Mubarak, which famously provoked the 2011 revolution. Medo and his family are sympathetic to Mohamed Morsi, the president who ruled for the blink of an eye after Mubarak and before Sisi. Medo voted for him because the Muslim Brotherhood was organised and worked hard. After Morsi was ousted, Medo pointed out that he'd been democratically elected – shouldn't that count for something? We drive past the presidential palace, another Heliopolis landmark, and Medo says with a bitter laugh, "I was in so many protests there."

Following Sisi's coup, Morsi's supporters occupied a public square for a month. When Sisi ordered it cleared, the army killed nearly a thousand people. By then, Egyptians had endured two and a half years of post-revolution stress, and many accepted this as the price of stability.

I'm dismayed to see Egyptians so beaten down. But maybe I'm bringing my own despair, as it's the first month of the Trump presidency. Looking around Egypt, all I can see is what America will look like if Trump has his way.

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Defunded public schools: Medo's middle sister goes to a tutor, skipping class (her teacher does too) until exam day. Xenophobia: Egyptian state television ran a public service announcement warning against foreign spies. Grotesque construction projects: One of Sisi's first gestures was a plan for a brand-new capital city.

At the panorama, Medo parks the car and goes to buy tickets. The lot is packed with school buses and motor coaches – not foreign tourists, but many with the darker skin of southern Egyptians and the enthusiasm of visitors on a big trip. Waiting for the next show, Medo and I buy popcorn and stroll the grounds. A group of high-school boys pose for selfies on top of a tank, and hidden speakers blare patriotic pop tunes: "My country, my country..."

"What do you think when you hear this, Zora?" Medo jams his fists into his jeans and glowers at his fellow citizens.

"I feel worried." After the election in America, overt patriotism seems like a harbinger of conflict.

"I feel embarrassed," Medo says. American music is better, he says. It can be serious, not stupid pop stuff. "Boshret Kheir" ("Good Tidings"), a catchy get-out-the-vote pop song, is now playing, and kids on the steps in front of the rotunda start dancing, in imitation of the charming video, which shows Egyptians from all over the country singing along. It was released in time for the 2014 election, in which Sisi was the only viable candidate.

Our group of ticket-holders is called in, and everyone jams together on the staircase. Behind me, girls giggle and whisper, "What's your name?" in English, then look away when I turn. "Ignore them, Zora," Medo mutters, again embarrassed.

Before he was president for almost 30 years, Hosni Mubarak was commander of the Egyptian Air Force. He claimed to have fired the first shot in what Egyptians call the October War of 1973; Israelis know it as the Yom Kippur War. On a visit to North Korea, Mubarak received a gift from Kim Il Sung: a team of his finest panorama painters, to create a memorial to the battle. It opened to the public in 1988.

The panorama is state-of-the-art. Ushers lead us to seats, and the whole viewing platform rotates slowly. Speakers thunder with machine guns, mortar explosions, and dramatic narration in formal Arabic. Medo slumps in his seat, reverting to school-trip ennui.

Technically, the painting is superb. It captures the sharp glare of desert sun off the Suez Canal, and fighter jets seem to float in the blue sky. The foreground diorama is decorated with sandbags and actual materiel from the

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battle. I'm thrilled to see a modern version of an art form I thought had died a century ago.

But after about fifteen minutes, the show is over and we're hustled out, to make way for the next crowd. I think wistfully of squinting through binoculars at near-naked ladies in Jerusalem, even of strolling around the platform at Gettysburg.

What made those cycloramas better than IMAX or virtual-reality goggles is that I could go at my own speed, alternating between the far horizon and a tiny tableau, between the general chaos and the specific gleam in the eye of a panicked horse. The Egyptian panorama experience grants none of this freedom; it is in keeping with all the other ways, small and large, that people here are controlled.

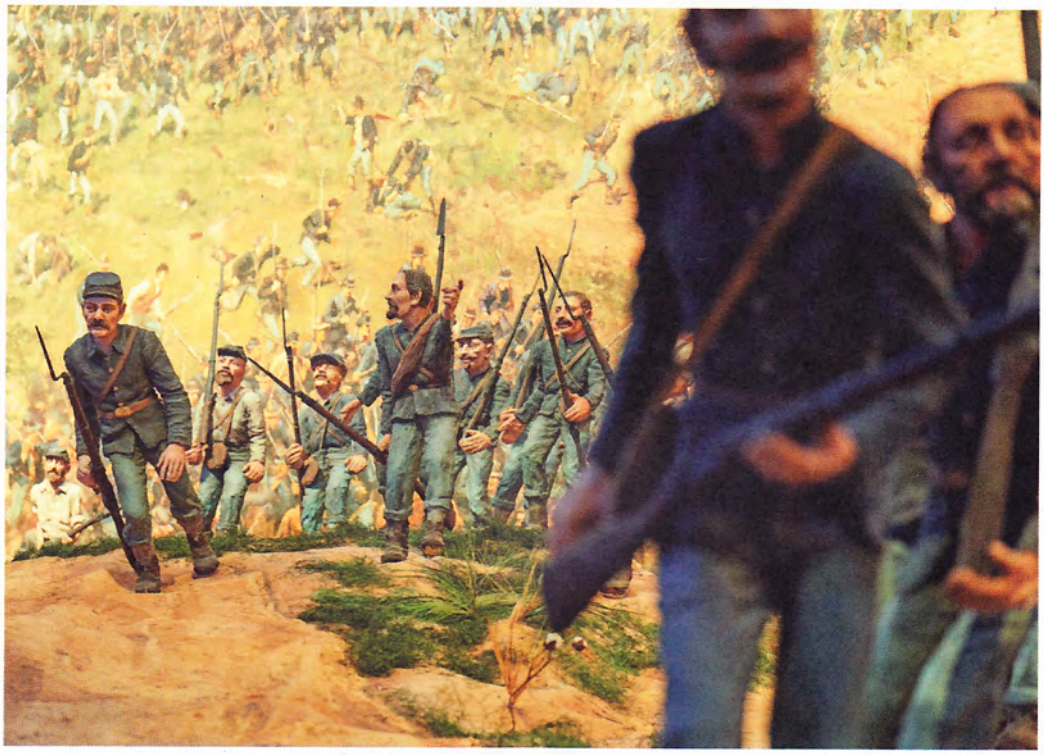
Back at Medo's house, Medo tells his dad where we've been. Older and fairly deaf, the man has barely interacted with me. Each day I come over and cook with Medo's mom and chat with the girls, and he retreats to another room. Today he speaks up, in a raspy voice, clearly agitated.

"You know it didn't happen that way, don't you?" he says in Arabic.

I do know. The October War Panorama is a work of shameless propaganda. It depicts a single great military moment: the successful breaching of the Bar-Lev Line in Israeli-occupied Sinai on October 6, 1973. The narrative then skips the Israeli counterattack that came within 60 miles of Cairo, and concludes with the declaration of victory – in 1978, when Sinai was returned as part of the Camp David accords.

On the campaign trail, Trump told Americans, "We're going to win so much, you'll get tired of winning." In Egypt, Medo's father has grown tired of being told he's winning.

After lunch, we go to the sisters' room and play Uno. A friend of Medo's mother comes over for a while, to show off her new hair colour. Somehow the conversation shifts, and Medo's mother tells the girls to leave the room. "I'm



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going to say some ugly things," she tells them. Then she and her friend have a pitched and furious argument about Sisi, of which I understand only the most basic elements.

It's not right, says Medo's mom, how people are arrested all the time, for nothing – it's worse than it was before, just for regular people.

Without him, counters the friend, the country would be like Syria by now, overrun by ISIS.

In the end, they're happy and chatting again. I'm relieved to see it's possible for two people to fight like this, about the most fundamental political issues, and then continue on.

Despite Medo's generous offer the night I arrived, the panorama is the only excursion we make. A few months earlier, Sisi unpegged the currency, and inflation is out of control, so it just makes more sense to stay home. Every day we cook and play Uno and chat. We talk about what our superpowers would be.

"Invisibility," Medo says immediately. He's already going for it, sinking into his hoodie.

The girls all want to fly, or visit space. Medo's mom wants to use her brain at 100-percent capacity, to learn everything in an instant. This reminds the eldest sister of a project she's working on for her engineering degree, and the competition in Singapore she and her team would like to enter. But that costs money the school doesn't have.

"I will tell you, Zora," she says with a sigh, "there are so many wasted minds here."

We sit in a circle and play our cards: pass, skip, reverse. The whole metropolis of Cairo feels no bigger than the girls' bedroom.

4

At the beginning of 2020, I saw the third surviving cyclorama in North America: *The Battle of Atlanta*, painted in 1885 and finally restored and put on display in a new, purpose-built rotunda. It was beautiful and impressive, nearly 15 metres tall and 116 metres long, and I spent almost two hours there, admiring the painting and all the related exhibits.

It is also a work of propaganda to rival its Cairene counterpart – or it was, for a good portion of its long life.

The Battle of Atlanta depicts July 22, 1864, when the Union troops definitively seized control of the railroad. The victory bolstered the North and propelled Lincoln to the presidency in the fall.

A team of German artists painted it in a workshop in Milwaukee. They filled it with gripping detail – one painter specialised in horses – and beautiful light. In one tiny pastoral scene, a dying man reclines like a shepherd in a golden field of wheat. The intended audience was the people of Minneapolis: Northerners, the victors. Veterans of the battle attested to its accuracy.

A few years later, the hype faded, and the painting was sold at auction to a showman named Paul Atkinson. He decided to tailor it for a Southern audience entranced with a growing Lost Cause narrative of the war. With some minor adjustments to the colour of some uniforms, a group of Confederate prisoners was transformed into fleeing Union soldiers. Atkinson advertised the work as "the only Confederate victory every painted."

By the time I saw the painting, the uniforms had been restored to their original colours; the narrative had been corrected. But the whole exhibit around the painting was about the painting itself and the various ways it had depicted the battle, how it did or didn't include other aspects of the Civil War period (there are no women; there is exactly one Black man). Unlike the *Gettysburg* cyclorama, which is still used to teach military details, *The Battle of Atlanta* is no longer a trusted source. It lives on as an educational tool, a warning.

5

I had plans to go back to Cairo in the autumn of 2020, but then the pandemic happened. Instead, I chat with Medo online and send him photos of my attempts at his mom's recipes. Fortunately he and his family are fine and healthy. "But, Zora," he asks, "what is happening to America?"

He and I are both consumers of our American national myth, and we are both disillusioned. From travelling, I've known for a long time that my country is not "number one." Mobile phones, health care, even democracy – they all work better in other countries. Yet I'm still shocked by the American failure to contain the virus.

This time has revealed our national myth to be not unlike a cyclorama – immersive yet antiquated, a beautiful, almost accidental form of propaganda. Not a blatant one like the immaculate October War story nor the hazy, unretouched vision of Jerusalem – more like *The Battle of Atlanta*, with all its revisions and omissions and its now-untrustworthy narrative.

That Atlanta trip took place a mere six months before I sat down to write this essay, but it feels like a different era – the predictable old days of Mubarak (who died in February 2020, a blip in the news) versus the new, erratic Sisi period. In quarantine, my life was more like my last visit to Cairo, saving money and playing Uno, and all my premonitions of the Trump era came to pass. Our immigration system was effectively shut down. Wealthy parents formed "pods" for their kids' education while public schools flailed. Trump hosted a spectacle at Mount Rushmore and ordered the construction of a statuary garden of "national heroes." And his response to the virus confirmed what many suspected: he was a fraud, as false and shameless in his attempts to rewrite history as Atkinson repainting *The Battle of Atlanta*.

The only good thing to come out of this period was the protests for social justice. Here in New York City every day brought marches, vigils, and sit-ins. In Atlanta and all over the South, monuments to the Confederacy have been taken down. It feels as if America is undergoing a restoration, or at least a reexamination, a scraping down through the layers. We're acknowledging the beauty of some scenes but asking: Where are all the women? Shouldn't Black people be part of the story as well?

After hours of scrutinising *The Battle of Atlanta* last January, I walked out onto the city's tree-shaded streets and found that my vision had changed. The horizon was far, then near. I was keenly aware of curves: on buildings, in signs, on people. The cyclorama, in a very physical sense, briefly changed the way I saw the world.

In my house now, we watch movies and cook and argue about politics. We chat with friends around the globe, comparing realities. What will happen when we Americans finally step outside again? Will we see the world in a different way? I hope so. –